Deliver Our Democracy:

Messaging Guidance to Pass National Election Standards and Combat State Attacks on Our Freedom to Vote

BACKGROUND

This past November, despite the pandemic and deliberate barriers from day-long lines to attempts to eliminate dropoff locations, voters turned out in record numbers to have our voices heard and elect leaders who will govern in our name. In the months that followed, certain politicians peddled electoral lies that fueled a deadly attack on our Capitol by armed right-wing militants. Having lost both the election and the attempt to undermine it, many of these same leaders have doubled-down on attempts to silence us by erecting new barriers to voting and thwarting attempts to make ours a true democracy. Compared to last year at this time, state legislators have introduced four times as many bills to restrict people's basic right to vote. Together, we must fight back against these attacks and pass national standards to make the promise of our democracy real for us all.

Fortunately, Americans are with us. A recent poll conducted by Lake Research Partners and Hart Research Associates found that 80 percent of Americans believe the Voting Rights Act is still needed, and a strong majority support the For the People Act, at 68 percent, and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, at 70 percent. Voters ranked "fair elections" and "freedom to vote" as top concerns (along with "jobs and economic wellbeing") and are eager to hear our plans to make elections safe and accessible for all Americans. There has been a real sea change in public opinion on voting rights, with a widespread desire for national voting standards and rejection of conservative states' rights arguments. While these bills encompass additional policy change than voting, our research and thus these recommendations focus on voting-related elements.

Thwarting state attacks and translating the popularity of For the People and the Voting Rights Advancement Acts into law will require significantly turning up the urgency, excitement, and engagement on our side. We must capitalize on this moment of possibility, desire for change, and openness to progressive solutions by flooding the debate with a shared, irresistible

message. Below, you will find research-backed guidance on how to tell our winning story so that all Americans have our freedom to vote respected and our voices heard.

MESSAGING GUIDANCE

- **LEAD** with one of the following shared values to claim and hold the moral high ground, which our research showed most effective in energizing our base and persuading the middle:
  - **Freedom:** Freedom to vote
  - **Voices:** Ensuring every voice is heard
  - **Inclusive Democracy:** For democracy to work for all of us, it must include us all
  - **Choices:** Voters pick our leaders, our leaders do not pick their voters
- **CHARACTERIZE** the opposition as erecting deliberate barriers to silence specific voices and name these in order to render clear the role that race plays
- **POSITION** voters as the protagonists who, by acting together, can move us forward as a country – in contrast to how our opposition is determined to set us back
- **FOCUS** on the creation of good (e.g., create a process where every American can safely and freely cast their ballot) rather than the amelioration of harm (e.g., fix our broken system)
- **HIGHLIGHT** the tangible, positive outcomes voting can deliver (e.g., pandemic relief, jobs, healthcare, and funding for infrastructure, schools, and communities)
- **AVOID** the opposition frame (e.g. fraud, security) and **PIVOT** to our frame of freedom
- **DO NOT REPEAT** accusations, even to refute (e.g. do not say "there is no evidence of fraud…")

CORE NARRATIVE: PROMOTING NATIONAL STANDARDS

Our core narrative offers high level language to be used verbatim and broken into shorter component parts as fitting the particular medium of communication, for example a quick tweet versus a whole speech. It covers both the For the People and Voting Rights Advancement Acts, with a focus on the voting elements of each:

> *Whatever our color, background or zip code, most of us believe that voters pick our leaders – our leaders do not get to pick their voters. When it comes to our elections, we want a transparent process we can trust, where Americans have equal freedom to vote, whether we live in a small town or big city, the south or the north. But today, a handful of extremist politicians put up barriers to silence our voices based on what we look like or*

where we live. It's time to enact national standards for voting to ensure all of us have a say in key decisions like pandemic relief, health care, and bolstering our economy. Together, we can ensure Americans can safely and freely cast our ballots so that every voice is heard and our elections reflect the will of the people.

TALKING ABOUT THE FOR THE PEOPLE ACT

In addition to our core narrative, we also need a way to characterize the myriad elements of each bill independently, in addition to the voting-specific pieces. Here is a descriptor for just the For the People Act:

> *The For the People Act will protect our freedom to vote by making sure that voting options are equally accessible across all 50 states, make sure our voices are heard by preventing billionaires from buying our elections, and ensure we can elect leaders who govern in our interests by having congressional districts drawn by independent commissions.*

TALKING ABOUT THE FOR VOTING RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT ACT

And here is our approach to most effectively characterizing the Voting Rights Advancement Act:

> *The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act would restore and strengthen our freedom to vote by making sure that any changes to voting rules that could discriminate against voters based on our race or background are federally reviewed, so we all have an equal say in our future.*

CORE NARRATIVE: COMBATTING STATE ATTACKS

Our core narrative for combatting state-level attacks on our freedom to vote offers high level language to be used verbatim and can also be broken into shorter component parts as fitting the particular medium of communication, for example a quick tweet versus a whole speech.

> *No matter our race, background or zip code most of us believe that for democracy to work for all of us, it must include us all. Throughout our history, we have fought to ensure more Americans have our right to vote honored and that every eligible American is able to cast our vote and have it counted. But a handful of politicians want to set us back, making it harder to vote and creating barriers to register for Black, young and new Americans. They hope to divide and distract us while they block policies Americans favor, from providing economic support to delivering vaccines to restoring our infrastructure. To move forward together, we must ensure that Americans can cast our ballot so we are able to elect leaders who govern in our interests and make the promise of our democracy real for us all.*

EMBRACE/REPLACE

Embrace	Replace	Why
Safe and accessible elections [for all] *Transparent process we can trust*	*Election security* *Election integrity*	"Safe and accessible elections for all" was our audiences' top value around voting and elections, followed by the idea that being able to vote is "fundamental to our freedom" and that "voting is a fundamental right." While voters register agreement with messages that try to reclaim "election security" and "integrity" for our side, our research showed that this approach backfires by actually increasing support for anti-voter policies. The phrase "election security" evokes a conservative law enforcement frame that feeds our opposition's narrative. "Election security" – and "election integrity," which the right has increasingly been utilizing – have become frozen phrases associated with fraud. They move our audiences to a fear-based mindset that demands restrictive, punitive measures and shuts them off from our progressive solutions.
Freedom to vote *Cast our ballots freely, safely and equally* *[The principle of] one person, one vote* *Right to vote*	*Voting rights*	Freedom to vote is a very strong frame for us, garnering greater support and intensity across measures. Safety - especially in our present pandemic context - was also deeply resonant; as was situating voting within the frame of equality either by simply calling for it or evoking it. While the individualized idea of voting as "my right" was also rated highly, "voting rights" renders the issue abstract and process-oriented - not tangible and personal.
Fair representation *Make the promise of democracy real for us all*	*Democracy reform* *Fix our democracy* *Restore democracy*	"Democracy reform" is a non-starter among voters who rank it last in a broad list of priorities for the country. We generally use the word "reform" to describe altering something undesirable

	Revive democracy *Fix our broken system*	rather than creating something good. This risks casting aspersions on democracy itself, furthering the right-wing project of impugning democracy as a form of government. "Democracy reform" also, along with phrases like "fix our democracy," suggests that democracy has already been fully established in the U.S., as opposed to being an ideal we have yet to ever reach. The U.S. has always excluded certain people based on their race or background from civic participation, precluding true democracy. Our project is not to restore the systems of the past but to enact new policies to finally deliver on our democratic promise.
Guarantee that Americans have a say in key decisions that impact our lives [like pandemic relief, health care, and our families economic well-being]	*Improve our democracy* *Fix our democracy*	In emphasizing *why* we need to pass progressive policies around voting and elections, our persuadables were significantly (10 points) more likely to rank it as urgent and necessary when tied directly back to having a say in tangible outcomes, rather than broad notions of improving democracy.
Americans *Eligible Americans** *Voters* **only in certain circumstances*	*Citizens* *Eligible citizens* *Eligible voters* *Every American* *All Americans*	When we qualify "voter" with a word like "eligible," we reinforce a right-wing frame suggesting there *are* ineligible voters who cast "illegal" ballots. Because our elections are conducted properly, people who are voting are eligible voters, so we should simply say "voters." When talking about the broader pool of people who are eligible to vote – but might or might not yet be participating – we are best served most of the time by simply saying "Americans" without any qualifier. Note, this also extends to *not* using "all" or "every" to modify Americans as this raises the question of ineligible people. In our survey, the statement "our

		elections should be safe and accessible to *all Americans*" significantly outperformed a split reading of "our elections should be safe and accessible to *all eligible Americans.*" *The exception to this finding is when we are specifically discussing voter registration or other more challenging policy specifics. In those cases, the phrase "eligible Americans" succinctly and effectively captures our meaning without playing into right-wing dog whistles around citizenship.
Deliberate barriers to voting *Denying our freedom to vote* *Anti-voter bills* *Protect our freedom to vote*	*Obstacles to voting* *Voter suppression* *Fight voter suppression*	"Voter suppression" is a phrase that is unfortunately not understood by many. Further, for conflicted voters, they are susceptible to the notion that there are votes we *ought* to suppress: those purportedly cast illegally. We can make this issue more concrete for our audiences by naming how certain politicians erect "deliberate barriers to voting." And we can render it more broadly off-putting by making the attendant harms seem widely felt.
Make voting safe and accessible	*Make it easier to vote*	Unfortunately, many people do not think it should be "easy" to vote. However, the concept of voting as safe and accessible is a highly rated value across the board.
Vote by mail	*Vote absentee*	In our survey, enabling voters to "vote by mail in every state" significantly outperformed enabling voters to "vote absentee in every state" with our base and persuadables in both support and intensity. Voting by mail became familiar to most voters as another safe simple way to cast a ballot in the 2020 election, whereas "absentee" implies some sort of aberrant circumstances and even voter neglect or failure to vote the "normal" way.
National standards for voting access	*Uniform standards*	In our survey, voters enthusiastically embraced "national standards for voting

	Minimum standards	access" and overwhelmingly rejected right-wing arguments that states should establish their own rules in elections.

SELLING OUR SOLUTIONS: LANGUAGE FOR PRO-VOTER POLICIES

No matter our color, background or zip code, most of us believe that voters should pick our leaders, our leaders do not pick their voters. While some politicians aim to pass policies to silence the voices of Black, Brown, young, and new Americans, we must not only push back, but also lay a counter narrative of the proactive policies that we believe will deliver the promise of American democracy to all. A recent poll by Strategies 360 found that Americans emphatically endorse (70%) efforts over the past year to give voters more options for voting safely like expanding early voting and voting by mail. Meanwhile, Lake Research Partners found high levels of support for both the For the People and Voting Rights Advancement Acts and their components. Below are pro-voter policies that garner widespread public support.

Policy	Language To Use	Support
HONEST ADS	*Create an "Honest Ads" policy so that online political ads disclose clearly who is paying for them*	This was the top-testing element of For the People Act in the LRP survey, garnering enthusiasm from our base and majority support from persuadables.
EARLY VOTING	*Ensure that early voting is equally available in every state*	High support across polls for early voting, with the S360 poll more specifically finding 68% support for keeping early voting locations open on nights and weekends and 67% increasing the number of days of early voting in their state.
VOTE BY MAIL/ ABSENTEE VOTING	*Enable voters to vote by mail in every state*	92% of our base and 75% of persuadables in the LRP poll support enabling voters to vote by mail in every state. "Vote by mail" garnered significantly more support and intensity with those audiences than "vote absentee."
PAPER BALLOTS	*Ensure votes are recorded on*	Widespread support across base,

	paper ballots that can be accurately recounted	persuadable, and opposition groups in LRP, with 82% total support.
PUBLIC NOTICE	*Require reasonable public notice for changes to voting laws*	LRP found 78% support, including 50% **strong** support among persuadables.
BALLOT CURE PROCESS	*Provide voters the opportunity to correct to correct errors in submitted absentee ballots, commonly called a 'ballot cure' process*	S360 found 63% support for the ballot cure process.
BALLOT PRE-PROCESSING	*Enable election officials to begin processing mail ballots before Election Day*	S360 found 65% support for ballot pre-processing.
BALLOT TRACKING	*Implement an electronic ballot tracking system which allows voters to know the status of their mail-in ballot at any time until it's verified and counted*	S360 found 83% support.
PRE-PAID POSTAGE	*Provide pre-paid postage on mail-in ballot return envelopes*	S360 found 73% support.
ONLINE VOTER REGISTRATION	*Enable eligible Americans to register to vote online*	S360 found 59% support.
AUTOMATIC VOTER REGISTRATION	*Register eligible Americans to vote automatically when they interact with a government agency like the DMV, unless they opt out*	S360 found 73% support.
SAME-DAY VOTER REGISTRATION	*Enable eligible Americans to register to vote at any time, including on Election Day*	LRP found 67% support overall, with 88% of our base supporting and of that 65% strongly supporting.
ELECTION DAY HOLIDAY	*Make Election Day a holiday*	S360 found 60% support.
VOTING RIGHTS RESTORATION	*Restore the voting rights of people who have completed*	LRP found 70% support, including 91% support from our base and 71%

	a prison sentence	support from persuadables. "Restore" outperformed "recognize."	

DESCRIBING THE PROBLEM: LANGUAGE FOR COMBATING ANTI-VOTER POLICIES

Policy	Language To Use	Best Practice	Why
VOTER ID	*Restricting types of IDs you can use to vote* *Forcing people to carry a specific type of ID to vote*	Do not specify or focus on the various types of ID that can be used.	Specifying IDs makes the policy seem more accessible and increases support for it.
ABSENTEE WITNESS REQUIREMENT	*Requiring voters to get a witness to authorize their private ballot*	Emphasize **privacy** of your ballot and vote.	We see reduced support for this policy when we include language about ballots being private.
ABSENTEE NOTARY REQUIREMENT	*Requiring voters to pay an officially authorized person, or notary, to sign their absentee ballot before submitting it to be counted*	Emphasize that notarization requires **payment.**	Emphasizing payment flips majority support for this policy to majority opposition against this policy.
EXCUSE-REQUIRED ABSENTEE VOTING	*Threatening voters who request an absentee ballot with felony prosecution if they cannot prove an excuse such as illness, active military status, or will be out-of-state at the time of election* *Barring people from voting by mail unless they provide an excuse*	Use a negative frame to talk about restrictions instead of simply talking about the requirement of needing an excuse.	Requiring an excuse to vote absentee seems reasonable to many, so it's better to lean into a very negative framing to reduce support.
VOTER	*Deleting people from the*	There's little	Describing

PURGING	voter rolls after they miss voting in recent elections	difference in describing this as "purging" "deleting" and "eliminating." However, it's best to characterize folks not participating as "miss voting."	non-participation as "miss voting" as opposed to "did not vote" helpfully suggests folks aren't to blame for not always engaging.
REDUCING EARLY/ IN-PERSON VOTING	Reducing the number of locations where people can cast their ballots (early). Restricting when early voting locations are open.	Highlight policies that reduce access for any and every voter.	People are more likely to think this could impact them personally, so opposition is high.
THIRD PARTY RETURN	Ensure voters can have necessary assistance from community organizations returning their sealed ballot to their local election official	We see states attempting to ban this practice. Frame this positively as assistance.	People tend to support banning the collection of ballots by third parties. Framing it as assistance casts it in a more positive light.

METHODOLOGY

Lake Research Partners, in collaboration with Hart Research Associates, administered a survey by online interviews, including moment-to-moment audio dial testing, from March 8-14, 2021. The survey reached a total of 1,040 likely voters nationwide, with additional oversamples of 300 voters of color and 200 voters each in AZ, GA, and PA. Data were weighted slightly by gender, age, region, race, education, and party identification to reflect the demographic composition of eligible voters. Oversamples are weighted into the national totals. The margin of error for the combined national sample is ±3%.

David Binder Research conducted an online survey between Jan 28 - Feb 1, 2021 of November 2020 voters (n2000) evenly distributed across seven battleground states (AZ, WI, GA, MI, NC, TX, PA). Each pro-voter message tested was randomly assigned to 500 respondents. MOE is ± 2.2% per cell, 4.4% per message, and larger for subgroups.

Strategies 360 conducted a survey of 1002 registered voters nationwide from January 25 -February 1, 2021. Interviews were conducted online among respondents fully matched to state voter files; the sample was weighted to represent the national population of registered voters. The margin of error for a survey of 1002 interviews is ±3.1% at the 95% confidence level for each individual sample.

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